

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

March 21, 2005

REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – The action this past week has definitely demonstrated that the legislative process can feel like a roller coaster at times.

Last week, I talked about the steps that were taken to make the Inspector General bill an idea that could be embraced by both sides of the aisle. After meeting with the Governor last week to discuss a proposal to minimize constitutional arguments that House Democrats had raised, the Speaker of the House embraced my idea to allow county prosecutors to handle cases of government corruption at all steps in the process and presented it as an amendment to his own bill.

This amendment was overwhelmingly accepted by the entire House, and representatives passed the bill. Although there is still concern for parts of the bill, it was gratifying to hear the Speaker thank those who had earlier criticized the bill, because the criticism had led to improvements on the Inspector General bill. To many of us, this sounded like express validation for our earlier boycott.

It also was gratifying to hear both the Governor and the Speaker publicly recognize my efforts in bringing bipartisan support to this idea. Although I received some ribbing that I had become the Governor's favorite Democrat, it was good to know that bipartisan efforts can lead to better government.

Other Democrat-inspired ideas were embraced as well. Democrat amendments to ensure that the Inspector General's records are open to public inspection and that the office is subject to the state's Open Door Law were also adopted. These provisions also will help to protect the public against further government abuse.

With all of these changes in place, Senate Bill 18 passed unanimously. The bipartisan effort to fight fraud and corruption in state government has been strengthened. All people want to see clean, open and honest government. The Inspector General should help us achieve that goal.

The bill will now be considered by the Senate. Many are anxious to see if the Senate adopts the proposal as presented or whether they will address concerns that still exist.

Regardless, the circumstances that led to the House passage of Senate Bill 18 demonstrate that the legislative process works best when all points of view and perspectives are recognized and acknowledged, and everyone keeps an open mind and treats each other with dignity and respect. I am pleased that we were able to get back together and work through our differences.

This past week also saw the Meth bill advancing through second reading. The initiatives that I brought forth on behalf of the Methamphetamine Abuse Task Force are moving forward and I anticipate that the entire House will vote on the Meth bill early this week. Since the House version addresses more than the version passed in the Senate, I anticipate that the bill will proceed to a conference committee.

A conference committee consists of two members from the House and two members from the Senate. If a bill that passes out of one chamber is changed in the opposite chamber, then a conference committee is routinely established to work out the differences to present a final version to both the House and the Senate. Many bills are sent to conference

committee and this is where the details of most legislation are completed.

The House is now in the process of considering Senate bills on second and third readings. One disappointment this week was the refusal by House Republicans of a second reading amendment presented by Rep. Dennie Oxley to Senate Bill 1, which addresses tax incentives.

This amendment would have raised the homestead deduction from \$35,000 to \$42,000 and would have created a farmstead deduction. The amendment was structured to provide property tax relief to homeowners and farmers. After opposition to the amendment was raised by the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, his fellow Republicans voted the amendment down. This was especially disappointing when one considers that property taxes are likely to increase with the proposed freeze on the Property Tax Replacement Credit (PTRC).

The last measure the House considered this past week was the Voter ID bill, which is Senate Bill 483. This bill would require that you would have to present a photo identification in order to vote. If this passes, then each of us will have to remember to take a photo ID to the polls. So remember to take your wallet or purse with you to the polls. Otherwise, it is to the end of the line for you!

This idea may not sound significant to many of us. I know when I go to vote, there has always been a friend or neighbor working at the polls who knows that I am who I say I am. But I do believe that this mandated identification is significant because it places an obstacle on one of our basic rights, the right to vote.

It was not that long ago when many Americans were denied the right to vote. Whether it was a poll tax or other means, obstacles were once commonplace at the polls. Although I view this bill as a means of restricting voter turnout, the stated purpose for the bill is to combat voter fraud.

However, no one has brought forward any examples of voter fraud that have occurred at the polls. The only examples of alleged voter fraud have been with the casting of absentee ballots. It is ironic that the photo ID bill mentions nothing about absentee ballots. For many, this gives rise to questions as to whether the bill addresses a real problem or whether it is an attempt to suppress voting.

Last November, I was impressed to see people standing in the rain in order to exercise their right to vote. I can only imagine what the reaction of those patriotic citizens at Immanuel Church would have been if they had been turned away because they left their ID at home or in the car. This bill will take us backwards in our efforts to increase voter turnout.

On a final note, I want to mention some special pages of this past week. On Tuesday, students from North Posey, New Harmony and Gibson Southern visited with me at the State House. One of them was an exchange student from South Korea. I cannot tell you the pride that one has to be able to "show off" our form of democracy. Thank you Mrs. Schapker for giving all of these girls the opportunity to participate in our state government.

The pace of this session is picking up. April 11 is the deadline to pass Senate bills, followed by two weeks of conference committees. We are scheduled to conclude on April 29, so I know there will be plenty to report as that date approaches. Until then, please stay in touch and thank you for this opportunity to serve.

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